

In this month's newsletter I bring you information about the Syrian refugee crisis. Syria's civil war is being described as one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time. Vermont has a long history of welcoming refugees to its communities. Working together, we can assist in bringing hope and safety to Syrian children and families by welcoming them to our communities.

- Karen Richards

*"Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars."*

- Khalil Gibran



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## THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

**WHO?** Of the refugees who have already entered the United States, about half are children under the age of eighteen, about 2.5 percent are adults over the age of 60, and less than two percent are young men of “combat age”. Many of the children have been out of school for months and some for years. More than 50% of the children have lost everything—family, home, school and friends. Many are suffering from trauma.

**WHY?** The refugee crisis arose out of the anti-government demonstrations that started as part of the Arab Spring in March of 2011. The violent government crackdown that followed caused an uprising by rebels who began fighting the regime. Five years later, the now full-blown civil war has claimed 250,000 lives about half of whom are believed to be civilians. The civil war has been further complicated by ethnic divisions and those involving secular and Islamic fighters.

**WHERE ARE THEY?** Nearly five million refugees have fled to the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and most recently Turkey. Approximately one million have applied for asylum in Europe. More than 13.5 million people inside Syria are still in need of assistance. Most of the displaced refugees are not living in camps but are crowded into whatever shelter they can find, often without basic necessities such as clean water and adequate sewage raising the specter of disease outbreaks such as cholera and polio. Aid efforts are hampered by the Russian airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria. By February of this year, fighting in the City of Aleppo cut off the main route for humanitarian aid causing more Syrians to flee.

**WHAT CAN WE DO?** Vermont has opened its doors to many different groups of refugees primarily in Chittenden County. By 2014, 6300 refugees and immigrants had made Vermont their home from Vietnam, Bosnia, Russia, Somalia, Kenya, Sudan and most recently Nepal. New Americans have given our state, which continues to suffer from a population loss particularly of young people, a new vitality, contributing in numerous ways to our economy, our culture, our diversity, and our tolerance. The United States must do its share to assist in this humanitarian crisis. Those efforts will be richly rewarded nationally and in Vermont.

## Did you know?

Half of Syria's pre-civil war population— more than 11m people have been killed or forced to leave their homes.

The U.N. estimates that 6.6m. Syrians have been internally displaced.

Many of the displaced refugees are struggling for survival in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey.

Almost 5m. Syrians have registered or are awaiting registration with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

Syrians are now the largest refugee population in the world. In 2012 there were 1000,000 refugees; by April 2013 there were 800,000 and that number doubled to 1.6m in less than four months. There are now 4.8m scattered throughout the region in the worst exodus since the Rwandan genocide.

According to the International Organization for Migration, more than 3,770 refugees died while attempting to cross the Mediterranean in 2015.

More than 250,000 Syrians have died as a result of the war, thousands of those killed were children.

Although refugees from certain areas often arrive without documentation such as birth certificates, this is rarely the case with Syrians. According to a U.N. official, "Iraqis and Syrians tend to be a very heavily documented population." Many of the families seeking asylum have passports or are able to produce military registration forms.



## THE IMPACT OF RESETTLEMENT ON COMMUNITIES

The economic benefits of immigrant resettlement and refugee resettlement are clear. A recent study, ["Refugees Work: A Humanitarian Investment that Yields Economic Dividends,"](#) revealed that refugees start businesses that employ locals at a higher rate than locally-born residents.

And young refugees bring increased benefits. The economic forecast for cities and states with aging populations is quite bleak. Resettlement provides a greater tax base, which is helpful for any economy. Although resettlement comes with an initial investment, history has proven that refugees not only repay that money, but they also begin providing economic benefits within five years.

Consider Lebanon, Syria's neighbor to the west. Lebanon has more than one million Syrian refugees living within its borders. This is the equivalent to more than one-fifth of the country's population. Despite a sharp decline in investments and tourism, due to its neighbor's civil war and an influx of refugees, Lebanon's economy is doing quite well. According to the World Bank, the country is experiencing its highest growth rate since 2010. And this story isn't unique to Lebanon. Other countries bordering Syria, including Turkey and Jordan, are experiencing the same type of economic benefits.

But financial benefits aside, how else can refugee resettlement help Vermont? In Rutland, where the Syrian refugees are being placed, the population has been experiencing a downward trend for decades. In the past, other cities with a similar decline in population have found a solution in the increase of immigrant populations. Cities such as Cleveland, Detroit, and Cincinnati have learned that attracting – and maintaining – immigrant populations is crucial to the rebuilding of their communities. Although financial benefits and labor are helpful to an economy, cultural benefits are just as powerful. Cities with diverse cultures, ethnicities, races, languages, and foods consistently attract more residents and tourists.

## THE EXTRAORDINARILY THOROUGH VETTING PROCESS OF REFUGEES

The process of obtaining refugee status takes between 18 and 24 months. According to a senior U.N. official, refugees are only accepted "after subjecting them to the most rigorous screening and security vetting of any traveler to the United States."

The first point of contact for a refugee is with the U.N. High Commission for Refugees. The UNHCR determines the best country for a refugee by considering several factors, including whether they have any family members in a particular country. If the most fitting country for resettlement happens to be the United States, refugees are then rigorously screened by the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center, and the Departments of State, Defense, and Homeland Security. In addition to biographical data, including name and date of birth, refugees' fingerprints are taken and checked against various agency databases.

Next the applicant will go through an extensive, face-to-face interview process conducted by DHS officers who are specially-trained on interview techniques and how to determine credibility or identify gaps in a story. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks nearly 15 years ago, this vetting process has been constantly improved upon and refined.



### HOW YOU CAN HELP

The first Syrian families are scheduled to arrive in October. To prepare a warm, welcoming environment for these families, significant work needs to be done. Non-profit and charitable groups, such as the [Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program](#) (VRRP) and [Rutland Welcomes](#) are working hard to prepare for the upcoming resettlement. Rutland Welcomes recently conducted the first of many furniture drives. Other groups are holding small, local fundraisers to create funds and purchase needed items. Residents are contacting the VRRP to become special advocates and “family friends” to the families once they arrive.

Advocacy and education are equally important tools. If the refugees arrive to an environment that is not welcoming, the positive benefits of resettlement discussed above will be less possible. We all need to work together to make this a positive experience, for Rutland’s residents, the Syrian families, Vermont, and our nation as a whole.

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### NEWS

- [DMV Changing Application Process After Discrimination Case](#)
- [County Sheriff's Office Settles Discrimination Case for \\$30,000.00](#)